Sharon A. Brown and Barbara Tagger

The Underground Railroad
A Study in Heroism

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here.
My Lord calls me, He calls me by the thunder;
Green trees are bending,
Poor sinners stand a trembling;
My Lord calls me, He calls me by the lightning;
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul:
ain't got long to stay here.

—"Steal Away" Spiritual

The Underground Railroad was perhaps the most dramatic protest action against slavery in United States history. It was a clandestine operation that began during the Colonial period, later became part of organized abolitionist activity in the 19th century, and reached its peak in the period 1830–1865. The story of the Underground Railroad is one of individual sacrifice and heroism in the efforts of enslaved people to reach freedom from bondage.

The phenomenon known as the Underground Railroad involved both a deep personal commitment (sometimes resulting in the loss of one's own life) and defiance of certain laws in the name of a higher moral imperative. The Underground Railroad was neither "underground" nor a "railroad." Usually scholars describe it as a loosely constructed network of routes that originated in the South, intertwined throughout the North, and eventually ended in Canada. Escape routes, however, were not restricted to the North, but also extended into western territories, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Its operations relied heavily on secret codes as railroad jargon alerted "passengers" when travel was safe. Runaways usually commuted either alone or in small groups, and were occasionally assisted by black and white "conductors" who risked their lives to escort runaways to freedom. By definition, this activity was clandestine, so information about sites and routes was kept secret or not widely distributed.

The historic Lovejoy homestead.Princeton, IL. Photo by Terry Donnelly.

After slavery ended, the story of the Underground Railroad was kept alive by oral tradition and written works, including personal accounts and historic documentations. Although the history of the Underground Railroad has been described in several publications, information about the current condition of sites and structures is limited. Many of these sites and structures, especially in urban areas, have been demolished or substantially changed to make way for development.

Various historians and organizations worked diligently to keep the memory of the Underground Railroad experience alive, such as William Still in his book *The Underground Railroad* (1872), and William H. Siebert's publications and collections in the 1890s. A contemporary effort by Charles L. Blockson resulted in the establishment of the Charles L. Blockson Collection at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Mr. Blockson's collection is a primary resource for documents and files on the Underground Railroad collected over three decades.

Former House Representative Peter Kostmayer (PA) introduced the concept of tracing the Underground Railroad, and asked Mr. Blockson if the project was a feasible one. Mr. Blockson told the congressman that based on his research he thought it was. In 1990, Representative Kostmayer and Senator Paul Simon introduced legislation to study options for commemorating the Underground Railroad. With the active support of delegations from several states, Congress enacted Public Law 101-628 on November 28, 1990, which directed the Secretary

of the Interior through the National Park Service (NPS) to study ways to commemorate and interpret the Underground Railroad.

A special resource study was undertaken by the Denver Service Center, Washington Office, Southeast Regional Office (now Southeast Field Area), and Harpers Ferry Center. The study is to consider establishing a new unit of the national park system; consider establishing various appropriate designations for routes and sites used by the Underground Railroad, and alternative means to link those sites, including in Canada and Mexico; and to recommend cooperative arrangements with state and local governments, local historical organizations, and other entities. An advisory committee of nine members representing the fields of historic preservation, African-American history, United States history, and members of the general public with special interest and experience in the Underground Railroad cooperated with the NPS during the course of the study. Committee members were Dr. John Fleming, Dr. Ancella Bickley, Dr. Thomas Battle, Mr. Charles L. Blockson, Ms. Barbara A. Hudson, Dr. Robin Winks, Ms. Vivian Abdur-Rahim, Ms. Rose Powhatan (Pamunkey), and Ms. Glennette Turner.

Levi Coffin House, Indiana.Photo by Ralph Pyle.

Upon congressional funding for the Underground Railroad study, the NPS in 1992 began data collection. The special resource study involved consultation with 34 states, two territories, hundreds of interested individuals and organizations around the country, as well as connections with Canada and the Caribbean. The study considered 380 suggestions about potential sites of significance to the Underground Railroad story. Although this list contained the names of several NPS areas, existing national historic landmarks, properties on the National Register of Historic Places, etc., it was not regarded as either comprehensive or definitive; rather, it is illustrative of the richness and variety of resources that can be used to tell the Underground Railroad story.

The Underground Railroad originated in the southern states and led to or through all the northern states to Canada, although some routes led to Mexico and the Caribbean as well. Some enslaved African Americans and Native Americans managed to live in relative freedom in remote areas within the South, including swamplands and parts of Florida. Other enslaved Africans found refuge with some of the Native American tribes that lived in the South and other parts of the country. However, they remained in constant peril of being caught or killed.

The geographic area in which the Underground Railroad story took place encompassed most of the present-day United States, although, in general, significant events occurred east of the Mississippi River. The territories of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, acquired in 1898 and 1917, respectively, had a far different experience with slavery. However, their experience before they achieved territorial status also forms part of any comprehensive view of the U.S. history of the Underground Railroad. These two areas represent the larger context of slavery in the Western Hemisphere. They further show how areas outside the United States played a role in the way slavery evolved in this country.

The special resource study also outlined visitor experience goals to describe conditions that can be reasonably provided and offered to visitors within the range of alternative concepts addressing Underground Railroad interpretation and preservation. These goals could be achieved through activities and interpretation available in different ways and places under different concepts. People visiting Underground Railroad-related resources or wishing to learn about the Underground Railroad should be offered opportunities to

- understand the history and meaning of the Underground Railroad
- appreciate the heroism of the unsung and often unknown people who escaped on the Underground Railroad
- be inspired by the Underground Railroad story and be motivated to share the story with others
- learn more about the controversial aspects of the Underground Railroad story—such as those dealing with race, human rights, and the continuing struggle for freedom
- sense the presence at related sites of people who participated in the Underground Railroad system, including runaways and others who risked censure, jail, or loss of life

Although alternatives such as creation of a new unit of the national park system or a special program of technical and financial assistance will require action by Congress, many ideas in this study can be pursued and implemented—as time and funding permits—by federal, state, and local governments and the private sector without any special authorization by Congress. For example, a private foundation either alone or in combination with other entities could create a national commemorative and research center.

In addition, some resources could be developed as part of a joint partnership between federal and other entities. These projects could use a variety of methods to accomplish mutually agreed-upon goals, with the federal participant assuming some tasks and other government and nongovernment organizations assuming other tasks. This mutual support would increase the effectiveness of each entity's programs.

Given the national significance of the story, the need for long-term preservation of resources, the public enjoyment potential, and the current amount of public ownership, the Underground Railroad story could become an example of a cooperative or partnership park. Several other products are being, or have been, produced in addition to the special resource study: a National Historic Landmark theme study, an interpretive brochure and handbook, and an Underground Railroad "home page" on the Internet.

NPS will seek to coordinate efforts with parks in Canada to create an international commemoration of the Underground Railroad. Since northern underground lines extended into Canada, several sites, including the Josiah Henson House in Dresden, Ontario; John Free Walls Historic Site, Windsor, Ontario; and the Raleigh Township Centennial Museum/Elgin Settlement in North Buxaton are available for public use, and are considered key places in developing a proposed international trail.

In short, the Underground Railroad is an example of a time in American history when people of different races, religions, and communities came together to help those who were willing to risk their lives for freedom. It was a "grass roots" effort, but one that had numerous successes. In the same way, whatever action Congress decides to take, grass roots efforts still can achieve successes in commemorating and interpreting the Underground Railroad.

National Park Service historian Barbara Tagger and interpretive planner Sharon A. Brown, Ph.D., both worked on the Underground Railroad project.

Martin Blatt and Liza Stearns

The Meaning of Slavery in the North

Interpreting Historical Ties Between the Industrial North and Slave South

Lowell National Historical Park was established in 1978 to preserve and interpret Lowell's pioneering role in America's Industrial Revolution. The park includes over five miles of canals, mill complexes, operating gatehouses, mill worker housing, and a museum with an operating weave room. The park's primary objective is to make the complex story of the Industrial Revolution accessible to the public. Interpretive programs include exhibits, tours, several award winning slide shows, special events and festivals, and a hands-on museum education center. Between 400,000 and 500,000 people visit the park annually.

Recognizing Interpretive Shortcomings

Until recently, the park has done little to interpret the connection between Lowell's 19th-century textile industry and the South's system of slavery. The significance of this omission was heightened when the park invited a group of industrial policy experts to participate in planning a new video, *Work in the 21st Century*. One participant was James Jennings, a scholar from the Trotter Institute at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The focus group began by viewing the slide show at the park visitor center, *Lowell: An Industrial Revelation*. Jennings pointed out that the otherwise very good program did not mention the slave labor upon which the textile